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Willow Bark: Nature's Aspirin

Medically reviewed by Debra Rose Wilson, Ph.D., MSN, R.N., IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT — Written by Rena Goldman — Updated on February 14, 2017

Side effects Forms and dose Benefits Risks Research Takeaway

What is willow bark?

Willow bark, the bark of several varieties of willow tree, has been used for centuries as a pain reliever. The active ingredient in the medicine made from willow bark is called salicin.

Some people use willow bark as an alternative to aspirin, particularly those that experience chronic headaches or back pain. Willow bark is also used in some products to aid weight loss.

It comes from the branches of 2- to 3-year-old willow trees. Willow trees and shrubs grow all over the world, except for Australia and Antarctica. The white willow and black willow are two of the most common willows that are used medicinally.

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Side effects

When taken in moderation, willow bark does not appear to have negative side effects. The salicin in willow bark converts to salicylic acid. Some believe that this makes it gentler on your stomach than lab-created aspirin. Too much willow bark, however, can cause stomach cramping and bleeding.

Forms and dose of willow bark

Capsules

Willow bark can be purchased from many drugstores and almost any health food store in a powdered, encapsulated form. The recommended dose for pain relief is 240 milligrams a day.

Bark

The active ingredient in willow bark is salicin, but the accompanying flavonoids and plant particles might be part of what make willow bark effective. For this reason, some people prefer to actually chew on the unprocessed bark of the willow tree. It is difficult to determine how much salicin you are getting from each piece of bark, so this method of consumption should be approached with caution.

Liquid

Willow bark can also be found in a distilled tincture form. Taking a drop or two per day for pain relief (up to 2 milliliters) can work as an anti-inflammatory and pain relief substitute for aspirin.

Tea

Some health food stores sell willow bark tea, advertising it as a pain

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Topical

Willow bark can be used topically. Since it isn't absorbed digestively, topical willow bark is a good alternative for those who commonly experience stomach ulcers. However, topical use can be harsh and cause skin irritation.

Potential benefits

When used on people with lower back pain, willow bark was found to be more effective than placebo in a recent herbal medicine review. Conclusive data that contrasts willow bark to traditional aspirin is needed. However, if you're looking for an alternative to aspirin, you could consider willow bark.

Willow bark can also be used to relieve menstrual cramps and bring down a fever. The salicin inside willow bark works the same way as aspirin, by reducing inflammation and pain as it enters your bloodstream. Because of

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Potential risks of willow bark

There are some people who should not use willow bark. If you have an allergy to aspirin, it's possible to have a reaction to willow bark as well. Willow bark can also interact with certain medications, like blood thinners and beta-blockers.

Children and adolescents up to the age of 16 are generally discouraged from taking willow bark for any reason. This is because of the risk of Reye's syndrome, a rare condition that causes brain and liver damage. Pregnant and breast-feeding women are also discouraged from taking any medication that contains salicylates. People with gastric ulcers should be especially careful with willow bark, in the same way that they would be cautious with aspirin, because too much could cause stomach bleeding.

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Current research

Even though it is used widely, very few clinical trials have been done to verify the effectiveness of willow bark. Preliminary studies do show that there are some health benefits, and that certain species of willow contain higher concentrations of salicin and flavonoids than others.

In the studies that have been done, the risks and side effects seem fairly minimal. And there are centuries of study and use of aspirin, which gets

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Takeaway

Willow bark has been shown to help relieve some mild discomforts. But more research is needed to fully understand how it differs from aspirin. While it may be an effective alternative to aspirin for some, talk to your doctor before choosing to take willow bark.

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